

ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD

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Company cleans up asbestos site; feds want buildings demolished

LIBBY (AP) — W.R. Grace and Co. spent about \$2 million last year to decontaminate five buildings at a former vermiculite export plant near downtown Libby of any asbestos residue.

Now, the Environmental Protection Agency wants the company to demolish the city-owned buildings, where asbestos contamination was discovered early in 2000.

Company officials maintain the buildings aren't a health risk.

"We know of no reason to tear them down. We felt we successfully cleaned them," Grace spokesman Alan Stringer said. "They can order us to do it; that's their prerogative, and we'll have to comply."

The EPA approved Grace's cleanup plan last fall. However, over the winter, asbestos fibers continued to filter out of cracks in the wood, EPA on-site coordinator Paul Peronard said.

"They didn't clean well," he said. "Right now, we're trying to resolve a satisfactory restoration plan."

Stringer acknowledged that asbestos fibers were found this spring around the foundations of the buildings.

Grace and EPA officials are working with the city and former tenants Mel and Judy Burnett to devise a plan for the property.

The Burnetts' retail lumber business and planing mill was relocated to U.S. 2 in Libby last summer, and it's unknown yet whether the business will move back to its previous location once it's deemed clean.

Vermiculite was processed and bagged there for decades, causing asbestos contamination, particularly in the soil. Contaminated soil has been hauled back to the vermiculite mine near Libby.

The EPA is coordinating testing and cleanup at several Libby sites this summer, including various schools and facilities.

Peronard wants all the school testing done and problems remedied before classes begin in the fall.

Meanwhile, testing in Libby houses continues and data will be compiled by this fall.

About 20,000 of the 80,000 cubic yards of toxic soil stockpiled at the Raintree Nursery site have been hauled back to the mine.

Cleanup crews last year excavated a massive amount of contaminated soil at the nursery, the site along the Kootenai River where Grace screened and loaded vermiculite ore. Dirt was kept at the nursery site until the EPA could work out a deal with Grace to dispose of it at the mine.